

How's Your Networking Working? Better if You Follow These Rules.

— by Ron Gibson

As a business owner, professional or consultant, networking is your highest return on investment marketing activity. It gets you the best results for the least amount of time, money and energy. Networking will do more to grow your business than advertisements, mailings, cold calling, social media and web marketing *COMBINED!* It's where you should focus the bulk of your marketing efforts.

Now, networking isn't anything new. It's the oldest, most established form of marketing in the book. It's about making connections, building relationships and having those people refer clients to you or become clients themselves. It couldn't be much simpler.

The only people for whom networking doesn't work are the people that don't do it. If you're a business owner, professional or consultant that engages in building your network—if you go out into the community and get to know people—you will get referrals, you will get clients, you will grow your business.

Networking just plain, simple, straight out works!

A big part of networking is attending events. These might be after-hours meetings hosted by your local chamber of commerce, lunches organised by industry groups, business breakfasts and the social side of conferences, seminars, exhibitions and trade shows. Then you've got your sporting occasions, corporate hospitality events, fundraisers, political functions and community gatherings. All are great places to meet new people and reconnect with people you know.

When you've got a business or practice to grow, you need to get out and about, meeting people and developing relationships.

Are you struggling to make your networking work for you? Do you hate going to networking events and try to avoid them as much as you can? Do you feel like you're wasting time (or your time is being wasted) when you talk to/meet the wrong people at networking events?

I've been going to networking events for over 3 decades now and along the way I have developed some effective strategies and tactics that I hope you will find helpful.

These are my top 16 rules for getting the most out of going to networking events.

1. **I shake hands and make eyes.** It's a firm squeeze (but not too firm) and I look directly in the eye for 2 or 3 seconds.
2. **I smile.** I find that by giving a smile I get one back.
3. **I'm typically the first to say hello.** I found that the most effective conversation starter is a friendly "Hello, how are you? I'm Ron" or simply, "Hello, I'm Ron". They are my go-to openers and 99 times out of 100 that is all it takes to set someone at ease and allow a conversation to begin. Sometimes I use context. For example, "how's the wine?", "how's the food?", "enjoying yourself?" Or, I'll comment on the venue or the occasion. "What a cool/great/amazing venue. Have you been here before?" or "Are you a regular at these things?"
- 3.5 **I don't even wait to get inside.** I start socialising in the lift. "We must all be going to the same place." Then I introduce myself.
4. **I focus on common ground.** My goal is to find a link— something we have 'in common'. Anything from kids, to holidays, to sports, to restaurants, to music, to cars. Anything at all. The key is to find that one small thing, that slice of overlap between you and them and run with it. Personal things in common makes it easier to establish rapport and trade stories and leads to a friendship, a relationship and lots of business.
5. **I ask more than I tell.** The exact questions I ask will depend on the circumstances and what I already know about the person. But questions that have always worked for me are, "where are you from?", "where did you grow up?", "how did you get started in business/your career?", "have you got any kids?" and "how's business?" You will find more of my favorite questions (and follow-up questions) in my article, [Better Questions, Better Networking Conversations](#).
6. **I listen hard.** I spend very little time talking about me, except to communicate what I do and why I do what I do. The more information I have about them, the better (and easier) I find it is to establish rapport, follow up, build the relationship and yes, win the business.

**I'm not telling you what to do, but rather sharing with you
what works for me and what will make it easier for you.**

7. **I go to give.** Everyone goes to a networking event to better themselves in one way or another. I'm always prepared to help someone else get better. When I'm talking to people a part of my brain is thinking, "I want to learn about this person and see how I may be able to play a role in their success." Giving may involve sharing information, being a resource, helping them solve a problem or challenge, offering support, connecting them with someone in your network, providing leads, articles of interest or something meaningful to the person,

giving a reference or being a customer. The best practice for any relationship is to be a giver before you're an asker; before you ask for an introduction or a lead or a meeting or help of any kind. Build trust and make a friend first. I recommend you adopt a similar mindset. This is what makes networking work for you.

- 8. Know where to go.** I go where my clients and prospects (and the people who serve my clients and prospects) go or are likely to be. I ask my clients and prospects where they go to network and that's where I go.

If you say, "I go to networking events, but I don't meet the right people", it means you're not networking where your prime prospects might be.

- 9. I don't just look for prospects and clients.** I think of every person I meet as someone who could refer clients to me or help me gain valuable information. I make friends, build rapport and provide value to everyone, without prejudging or qualifying them. You never know who might have a client or friend in need of your product or service or what sort of business intel will spring up.

If you say, "I go to networking events and I see little or no return", it means you're not following these fundamentals.

- 10. I show up early.** That way I can talk to people under more relaxed circumstances and in smaller, more manageable groups before everyone arrives and the event is in full swing. Arriving early means I usually get to meet the host/s. I like to ask them what I can expect, if there are any tips they can give me and who are the people that I should meet. This gives me clues as to how I should 'work' the event instead of winging it.
- 11. My message is clear.** When someone asks me what I do, I don't ramble on for minutes. In just a few seconds I say what I do, why I do it and who I help. This is my message: *"I help professionals and consultants get more and better clients... and I get a buzz out of it because I know I'm making an important difference in their lives."* If people want to know more I tell them a couple of very short stories. 1) My perfect client's story, which is about them being busy, but not making enough money and 2) My story, which is about why I do what I do. I discovered that when I eventually got my message 'right' I started getting a lot more referrals and business.
- 12.** I make sure that I take a 'next step' if the opportunity is there. It could be anything from a simple business card exchange, to a cup of coffee, to an invitation to a social event. I want to make certain that I have achieved my

objective before I move on to the next person. My exit line? “I’m going to meet some other people now”, accompanied by the appropriate pleasantries.

- 13. I don’t expect much right away.** Relationships are cultivated, not hatched. I don’t treat an initial meeting like a transaction. If I see a potential relationship to be had I know the first meeting is just the first meeting. For that stranger to end up as a client or strategic partner it is essential that the first meeting lead to a second and maybe a third, a fourth, a fifth and then perhaps even more. But in the beginning making friends, building rapport and providing value set the stage for future communication and success.
- 14. I don’t linger with friends.** I prefer to spend most of my time at networking events with people I don’t know. The reason is that I tend to make ‘small talk’ with people I know and ‘bigger talk’ with people I don’t know. My view has always been, small talk leads to small business or no business, and big talk leads to big business or the opportunity for big business.
- 15. There’s no time to waste.** The choice is yours as to how you invest your time at a networking event. I normally set myself the task of having 4 or 5 good conversations as well as meeting the key people I set out to meet. Then I call it quits saying, if asked, that I have somewhere else I need to be. Having a goal of meeting a certain number of people is a great strategy to help you make the most of the limited amount of social time you have.
- 16. I follow up immediately.** Networking doesn’t stop with meeting people for the first time. The rewards come from following up and staying in touch. The secret to effective follow-up is to provide value to your new friend. Something, anything that will help them win, score, make money or otherwise better themselves. If you make yourself valuable others will want you in their lives.

I’ve just given you a few pointers, some guidelines and the rules that I have been following for more than 30 years. There are other ‘rules’ and you can find them in my e-books and on my website, but these will help you make connections, set appointments, build relationships, attract referrals, and ultimately win business.

If you’d like to dig into a bit more detail just drop me an email and I’d be happy to chat over a coffee or the phone.

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